DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 046 343 HE 001 922

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TITLE	Challenges to Higher Education.
INSTITUTION	Chicago Univ., Ill. Office of Public Information.
PUB DATE	11 Dec 70
NOTE	7p.; Address delivered at the annual dinner of the Chicago Association of Phi Beta Kappa, December 7, 1970
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Anti Intellectualism, Culture, *Educational Objectives, *Educational Problems, *Educational Quality, General Education, *Higher Education

ABSTRACT

Education in various ways and at various levels is one of the chief mechanisms for the transmission of culture and civilization and is a principal means for guiding the process. The attainment of this culture and civilization is a demanding and painful process. We live in a time of curious anti-intellectualism in which knowledge is being distorted and where these distortions are spread by the means of communication. The quality of education is neglected at all levels, and this situation has been aggravated by lumping all the levels together when the problems are different. An interlocking among the levels is desirable, but not at the cost of obscuring the qualities and values of each level or of concealing the fact that fewer institutions and persons can qualify at the later levels if excellence is to carry any meaning. Our present system of higher education is top-heavy and maldistributed, often the result of previous support from the federal government, which has been eager to provide funds for immediately felt needs and fads, but not for the maintenance of quality. (AF)

ED 046343

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12-11-70

Following is the text of an address delivered by President Edward H. Levi on Monday, December 7, 1970, at the annual dinner of the Chicago Association of Phi Beta Kappa.

CHALLENGES TO HIGHER EDUCATION

It appears that forty-five hundred years ago, or thereabouts, the Sumerians had a well-organized educational system. The head of the Sumerian school was the professor, or school-father, joined by other experts for particular subjects. The assistant professor was known as "big-brother." There were monitors in charge of attendance and proctors for discipline. The curriculum included the basic skills of writing and mathematics. Training in writing required a systematic knowledge of the known facts of the time and of the important institutions of living. There was instruction in practical application, the copying of model contracts, the solution of problems "dealing with wages, canal digging, and construction work," and emphasis on creative writing which manifested itself in the recording of myths, epic tales, and lamentations. A four thousand year old document describes a schoolboy's day. It starts cheerfully with the pupil saying to his mother, "Give me my lunch, I want to go to school." But everything else is downhill. The schoolboy is beaten for having something missing from his tablet; for talking; for going out the gate without permission; finally, because his handwriting is unsatisfactory. The solution which the boy naturally comes to is to ask his father to give to the teacher "a bit of extra salary." The father complies. He invites the teacher to the house. The schoolteacher is seated in the big chair. He is fed with flattery, given extra salary. And then, as I suppose schoolteachers sometimes do, the teacher responds. He expresses high hopes for his pupil, paints a rosy future, and then, ambiguously substituting the wish for the reality, says of his student, "You have carried out well the school's activities, you are a man of learning." Reflecting on this and another ancient manuscript, Professor Samuel Noah Kramer wrote: "It is not easy to decide whether the faculty of the Sumerian school consisted largely of sadists or whether its student body consisted of rowdies and roughnecks . . . the ancient pedagogues seem to have had their hands full trying to control pupils who took pleasure in pushing, shouting, quarreling, and cursing." We should remember it is not clear that Pestalozzi would have done better in Sumer.

The excavations of Sumer remind us that formal education has been around for a long time. If we are to think seriously about the challenges to, the criticisms of, the hopes for, education, it is well to have this perspective. There is considerable diversity in the history. It is difficult to think of experiments and procedures, including the silliest, which have not been tried. "It is my conviction that the schools are responsible for the gross foolishness

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of our young men, because in them they see or hear nothing at all of the affairs of everyday life." I am not sure what to make of this ancient plug for relevance or education for maturity, which, if the scholars are right, comes from Petronius, the playmate and abettor of Nero, and a man whose view of the vagaries and opportunities of everyday life in Rome is perhaps not what is normally intended by calls for relevance today. Yet this also is a reminder that some criticisms of education are naturally perennial. It has to be this way. We are describing in education an institution closely bound to man's sense of purpose and destiny, his happiness, his defeats. To think of the purpose of education is to think of the nature of man, his discontent and hope, his awareness of limitations and aspirations.

If the purpose of education is to make men happier, then we know we are in difficulty. "One might say the intention that man should be happy is not included in the scheme of creation. . . . Our possibilities of happiness are . . . limited from the start by our very constitution. It is much less difficult to be unhappy. Suffering comes from . . . our own body, which is destined to decay and dissolution, and cannot even dispense with anxiety and pain as danger signals; from the outer world, which can rage against us with the most powerful and pitiless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations with other men." We can more easily accept the first two sources of suffering, as submissions to the inevitable and also as pointing the direction for our efforts to mitigate suffering; "the experience of several thousand years has convinced us of this." But as to the third, the inadequacy of our methods of regulating human relations in the family, the community, and the state, we "take up a different attitude." We cannot see why the systems we have ourselves created should not ensure protection and well-being for us all. To be sure, when we consider how unsuccessful our efforts to safeguard against suffering in this particular have proved, the suspicion dawns upon us that a bit of unconquerable nature lurks behind this difficulty as well -- in the shape of our mental constitution. "It is impossible to ignore the extent to which all civilization is built upon renunciation of instinctual gratifications. . . . This cultural privation domirates the whole field of social relations between human beings; we know already that it is the cause of the antagonism against which all civilization has to fight." "Culture has to call up every possible reinforcement in order to erect barriers against the agressive instincts of men and hold their manifestations in check. . . ." "If civilization requires such sacrifices . . . we can better understand why it should be so hard for men to feel happy in it." And if culture makes too many demands for humanitarian ideals, by analogy to what happens within an individual, it is possible whole societies may become neurotic under the pressure of the civilizing trends. In this context -- an analysis which, of course, comes from Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* -- we may say that education carries a complex burden. For education in various ways and at various levels is one of the chief mechanisms for the transmission of culture and civilization; a principal means for guiding

the process; the best, if not the only, source for attaining that understanding which is possible.

A long history mocking attempts at novelty, perennial complaints winning the popular ear, inevitable discontents echoing what Freud called the amazing point of view that civilization is itself to blame for a greater part of misery -- and yet we remain convinced that the kind of education we have is more than just a product of society. We know that education can make a difference in personal lives, that it can change the quality of culture. We make such judgments about societies other than our own. So we trace the change in Moslem culture to the anti-intellectualism and mysticism which "was to throttle almost all innovation in Moslem science and philosophy." And we interpret the lack of change and the isolation of Chinese culture over a long period to a system of education which reinforced a bureaucratic structure and, by its emphasis on memory and routine, frustrated enterprise and invention. We are, of course, caught in a vicious circle if we conclude that these observations are only the products of our own culture and have no other objective reality. Yet the possibility of this vicious circle and our willingness to back away from judgments on this account indicate how difficult it is for us to confront our own problems.

We must try to describe some of the main features of our own present attitudes and practices.

We live in a time of curious anti-intellectualism. Anti-intellectualism, or the non-rational in any event, can be defended. Vast areas of life are preempted by it. Moreover, there is little new about some of the more bizarre forms of anti-intellectualism, such as mystic cults, the use of chemicals, ecstatic trances, and other examples of this kind of liberation. They are quite old, quite modern, quite American. Unhappily, if one thinks of cruelty in the world, there is also nothing new in the attractiveness of authoritarian, particularly collective authoritarian, fury. What is new in our day, and it has special relevance to education, is the combination of popularized forms of intellectual doctrines into an assault upon the validity of rational inquiry and intellectual truth, and therefore upon the intellectual disciplines themselves and upon standards of excellence. Erik Erikson has recently written concerning "the proud rationality of the Enlightenment of which Freud was probably the last great representative, and which he crowned by insisting that irrationality and the unconscious be included in the sphere to be understood rationally." Nevertheless, the doctrines which are combined are the distortions of the Freudian emphasis on irrationality and the unconscious, together with notions of economic determinism and the automaticity of scientific laws. The combination proclaims that what we say and what we think are so predetermined and conditioned as to have no objective validity, at least if the important area of human relations is involved. In some ways this is an assault by a portion of the scientific community on the validity of the truth-finding process in the social sciences and for a large part of the

humanities. But knowledge cannot be so compartmentalized as to keep the taint from spreading. It has spread. This is perhaps not a surprising development. It represents a complaint against the human condition, against the cause for unhappiness we find hardest to accept. Its solution for problems, as Sir Isaiah Berlin has pointed out, is not to understand them but to obliterate them. The distortions are aided, perhaps made inevitable, by the greater means of communication, and therefore miscommunication, now available, and also (and I must confess to considerable pain on this point) as a consequence of the size of the overall academic or semi-intellectual establishment and the problems to which this gives rise. The anti-intellectualism is further aided by the techniques of the social sciences themselves, which find it easier to supplant analysis with opinion polling, thus making sure that ignorance, which always has greater power than knowledge, remains secure in that position. And it joins with a thrust toward egalitarianism determined at the higher educational levels to repeat the same mistakes which are known to have occurred in the grade and high schools, thereby shortchanging the students by pretending they have succeeded when they haven't and revealing a kind of inadvertent condescension, even though kindness is often intended. It is an expected phenomenon of our time that Phi Beta Kappa should be worried its award of membership might in some way reflect standards and rewards for a particular kind of excellence.

The uniqueness of American education today is the number of students in proportion to the total national population and in proportion to their age group, who go to school and who stay in school for a long time, through the college years and then on through graduate and professional school. The November 25 issue of *Le Monde* weekly comments that the same proportion of college students in France would require France to have two million university students rather than the six hundred thousand she actually has. *Le Monde* comments that the American figure includes college pupils "whose four-year course cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered of university stature." Since the French university is not a paragon to be copied, this statement, if taken seriously, is somewhat more devastating than may have been intended. But we should welcome any jab which makes us look more directly at what we are doing and why we are doing it. I won't belabor the point that our college and graduate and professional education require for most students too long a period; that we should place greater stress on the completion of two years of college with, if necessary, a suitable degree at that point; that we should have graduate and professional programs which begin after this two years; that we should establish with some status the master's degree; and that we should try to shorten, not lengthen as we have been doing, professional training. This is all now in the popular wind, whether anything comes of it or not. I would rather press on to other aspects and consequences which arise from our present situation.

The main thrust of what I have to say is that we have neglected quality at all levels, that this has been furthered by lumping all the levels together when the problems are different, and that this

lack of concern for quality will have and has had disastrous consequences for our society. This is particularly true in connection with our unwillingness to confront the problems of liberal education and to acknowledge the importance of liberal education in setting forth the foundations of civil society and of examining in depth and through discussion the ethical and moral problems which any citizen or human being must meet. It is true also at the graduate level, where we are apparently set upon a course which will deprive the educational system as a whole and our country of the results of basic research and thoughtful inquiry. Our major error, although it has some arguments in its favor, is to treat all education as though it were but a continuum from the earliest grades through post-doctoral study. There are important differences between that education which is required of everyone; that education which we say the society should be prepared to offer to everyone and which is the modern version of liberal education; that education which gives selected students a further basic training in the disciplines and professions; and that special education reserved for the particularly trained, gifted, and motivated, where special knowledge and skills, or basic research and inquiry, fulfill the public interest. An interlocking among the levels is desirable, but not at the cost of obscuring the qualities and values of each level or of concealing the fact that fewer institutions and persons can qualify at the later levels if excellence is to carry any meaning. It is not undemocratic to make these distinctions, although perhaps some such thought (as well as local pride and cartelization) has made it difficult for us to face up to them. The cost of obscuring the differences is illustrated in the eloquent essay to which I have repeatedly referred. Freud writes of the artist's joy in creation or "the scientist's (joy) in solving problems or discovering truth." He describes the value which culture places upon the higher mental activities -- intellectual, scientific, and aesthetic achievement. But he concludes that this is a capacity only available to the few. "It presupposes," he writes, "special gifts and dispositions which are not very commonly found in a sufficient degree." One is tempted to add "at the present time." The course of education, which can transform a culture and the persons touched by it, may make this capacity more pervasive. It is not that pervasive now. And the requirement for research and this kind of intellectual discovery for those who have little capacity or enjoyment in it is self-destructive, wasteful, and only enhances mediocrity. It is not so important if we have placed an unattainable value before a relatively few scholars. It becomes much more important when we insist, as we have done, that most of those who teach most of the young at the college level will have gone through a process which, for many of them, can only accentuate a feeling of personal inadequacy, emphasize the importance of pretense, and suggest to them that somehow the system has failed them. If this is the view of the instructor, it is likely to be the view of his students.

The freedom to teach, to explore new ways of teaching, to conduct research, to follow ideas where they lead are all central to our tradition of education. But these freedoms do not necessarily

discharge, nor do they remove, the obligations of liberal education. We have to ask ourselves why we believe that a liberal education in some form should be made available to every citizen, at least within a broad range of qualifications. A part of the reason is that we know that certain skills are required for living in our society, and at this level we emphasize those skills which are related to comprehending, communicating, and reasoning in the manner required by the basic intellectual disciplines. But surely a great deal more is seriously intended. We are concerned with the training of a citizen. We are anxious that he understand and be aware of ancient problems which relate to the organization of the state, the necessity for and the inevitable imperfections of justice, the problems of choice and the distribution of goods, the inescapable problems which do relate to happiness and the nature of man. This kind of a program can be taught by experts or specialists in particular disciplines, but the elaboration of the latest research, or the doctrines upon which investigations are to be based, is insufficient to provide that kind of breadth, perception, and perspective required for an educated citizenry. The research or teaching assistant, the average research professor concerned to make his mark on a particular segment of knowledge at the very least, has to be asked to give a substantially different kind of emphasis than he provides in his other work to this most demanding program. In general, and in most places, the program is inadequately performed because it is not seen in these terms.

Our present system of higher education thus is top-heavy. It is also maldistributed. Some of the maldistribution has resulted in part from prior programs of federal support for higher education. We should admit, however, that while it is very natural, it is also a national disgrace that it is assumed not to be politically feasible to take actions explicitly explained as contributions to the maintenance of quality. Federal support for education usually rides on the needs and fads of the moment, creating artificial programs out of new imaginary disciplines, searching for novelty and experiments, with the assumption that the core things which count must be taken care of otherwise or incidentally or by happy coincidence. It is this kind of approach which has now resulted in the precipitous reduction in federal support for basic research in institutions of higher learning over the last three years. The reduction has fallen most heavily on the quality institutions, and particularly the private universities, where the reduction in graduate assistance programs necessarily hits hardest those institutions which must charge the higher tuition. Our country is not well served by these developments. It may be inevitable that certain areas of potential cultural life should be a wasteland. But this kind of approach to higher education is strange indeed.

One small illustration may suffice. In Cyrus Sulzberger's *The Last of the Giants*, he quotes from a conversation which he had with Secretary Dulles on November 12, 1955. Mr. Sulzberger asked Dulles whether the State Department had given any thought to the "liberation" of the Central Asian Muslims of the U.S.S.R. I do not comment on the question, but the answer is interesting. Mr. Dulles said: "We don't

know enough about that area to have a program. There are simply not enough trained people to help us make a policy there. . . . The whole personnel of our country -- not just the State Department -- is lacking in knowledge about certain parts of the world. Take Africa for example. The Foreign Service has not been built to produce people of that sort." It so happens that I read this passage on the same day The University of Chicago received a memorandum from the Federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare announcing a 50 percent cut in support, applied nationwide across the board, for the special Language and Area Centers, of which The University of Chicago has three -- in South Asian, Far Eastern, and Balkan and Slavic language and area studies. These are now national cultural assets in fields where apparently we are prepared to lapse back into contented ignorance.

I must confess to some forbidden and also uneasy thoughts as I contemplate the reactions of our society and the institutions in it to the challenges which now face higher education. Of course, higher education in many forms will continue to exist. In some way, it will evoke the kind of understanding support and leadership it requires. The desperate problems of our time will recede as the community is made whole. But at some later time, there may be those who will ask themselves whether the quality of life and the cultural richness of living would not have been greater if we had been more alert to the long-term problems of excellence and quality. They will be correct. For in the long run, attention to these problems, certainly in education, would have made the most difference.

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